THE ADVENT OF THE BAMBOCHADES!

BY

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P R O L O G U E

On the day that Loretta turned eighteen, there was something seriously wrong with her: she was still playing with dolls. Yes, she was an adult, she should know better, but she simply could not help herself: she was playing with them twenty-four seven. Combing, curling and cutting her dolls' hair in the morning, holding tea gathering and fancy dress parties with them till sunset and sleeping with the male ones at night. She had spent the entire last three months on the playground. Months in which she hadn't encountered a single person other than these inanimate objects that were - and had the purpose to be - merely actual persons in her imagination.

Did she like it? Living her life in complete solitude, missing her loved-ones and friends? Because although the dolls took on the semblance of the people she loved most, she knew deep down that they were not. Dolls didn't have a consciousness. Even a child of two was aware of this. They might still enjoy playing with them all alone after all, but she didn't. She despised it. She hated to be deceived in any way for however pleasing, and sycophantic, and sympathetic these dolls were. But even though she despised playing with them, she couldn't stop; these dolls were scattered everywhere and simply would not leave her alone. There was nothing to be done about this, it seemed to her, however much she may have wished. And sometimes she did indeed try to get rid of them. But when she put away her dolls in big cupboards or chests, they would immediately pull themselves out. Even if she put a lock on it, and for a moment she could breathe a sigh of unmonitored relief, she would soon hear the sounds of loud knocking and screeching. She was not delusional - no, don't for a second think that. They could actually do that. They were automata, you see, wind-up toys, with a sound instrument right down in their throat.

She, of course, didn't wind her dolls up to begin with. She would never do that and she didn't have a clue who else did, if anyone. It must have been a really complex mechanism that they possessed, for they always acted according to circumstances. If she asked a thing, they would always be prompt to give a fitting reply. But thinking this necessarily meant it acted on the circumstances was stupid and naive – something a sceptic like Loretta didn't really appreciate. It could just as well be the case that the dolls were only able of doing one movement repetitively, just with a very long timespan and the fact that this fitted circumstances perfectly was merely a complete coincidence. But from all the things that were uncertain to her, one thing she did know. These dolls didn't have an infinite lifespan - 'life' here is an unfortunate word - and if she kept them captive for a couple of days, they would eventually run out and remain silent for ever. Why was she certain of this? Well, because these

dolls had the very function to be indiscernible from something that did remain permanently silenced if not nourished for a couple of days. You see, if she kept her dolls captive in, let's say a chest, for a day or six, the police dolls would seize her and put their toy handcuffs on her, and throw her in a makeshift cell. They could do that. These dolls had her size and her strength, and would in that regard be more like bamboches, the toy her father used to give to her when she was little. Whichever way you looked at it, these dolls were indiscernable from human-being.

You might think she was merely complaining about her own life, and that this set of circumstances was completely unique to her. That these life-size dolls, these bamboches, were only torturing her with their deceptive world of make-belief. That she was the only one to live in isolation like that. But nothing was further from the truth. Everyone was living their lives in complete solitude, segregated from their fellow living friends, family and acquaintances. Everybody was completely separated from each other and he or she who would deny this certainty only proved that he or she was playing with dolls. Loretta different from the others in this small but significant regard: she alone was mature enough to be aware of it, while others still believed in this imaginative world.

These bamboches did not only try to deceive her into thinking they were actual people, they were also the very perpetrators that separated her from all their acquaintances; her friends, her family and everyone she loved. The bamboches didn't do it by force, but indirectly through gaining their attention. They only had to seduce one of her friends and she would never see that friend again. A bamboche could easily seduce one of her homegirls, having a vast advantage over real boys since such a seducer was explicitly designed to fulfil the girl's highest standards. Time the girl could spend with her actual friends, she would waste with this bamboche boy and his entire family. If she fell down this path, she could never in her life find her way out. If she decided to go back, she would only have the illusion of coming back to her house and seeing her friends and parents again, but they wouldn't actually be there - not them. They were bamboches that appeared exactly like their friends and the girl could never discern them from her real friends, never. From there on, her entire life would just become a performance; a complete bambochade.

See! She didn't behave like a little child when she was scared to sleep alone in her own bed and had to seek refuge with her parents' at night. She had to wake over them, because if she lost sight of them, they would be, one way or another, replaced by bamboches too. You will surely think, what evil, sick desires drove these bamboches to do this to people? To take away all their loved ones and to then deceive them into thinking this was not the case? What sick pleasure did they get from this? What kind of wicked satisfaction? The strange truth is that the bamboches did this entirely and altogether for altruistic reasons. Their purpose was to create a better world. By removing their real friends and relatives they were removing everything that was messy and flawed, whereas the lifeless doubles would bend to their every wish and behave with the ideals in their mind.\

What satisfied her? If Loretta could answer this question, she could find out the thing the bamboches would try to swap and change in her life. This was hard to answer, even for herself. But one thing she did know: the thing that satisfied her was the thing she found to be desirable. If she didn't find something desirable, it would most definitely not satisfy her and if something didn't satisfy her, she most definitely wouldn't find it desirable. For everything to be satisfactory to someone, it had to be desirable to him. And this was a much greater problem than it may initially seem.

Because if something was less desirable than something else and only one of the two things could exist simultaneously, and out of the two only the less desirable thing existed, there was necessarily something which was not desirable; the less desirable thing's difference with the more desirable thing. So for everything to be desirable, the most desirable thing had to exist. What was the most desirable thing? It was different for everyone - which would later become the central problem - but there was one thing that could be said for all. That what someone desired the most was someone's

ideal world. Because if besides the most desirable thing there could have been something which was desirable additionally, than the combination of the most desirable thing and the additional thing would have been the most desirable thing. Therefore the most desirable thing couldn't have a desirable addition and as such, the most desirable thing was the most desirable world of all other possible worlds: one's ideal world. And that was the very problem; everyone's ideal world was different and it was therefore impossible to fulfil the ideal world of two persons, let alone that of everybody. Meaning that in one person's perfect world, there was always something undesirable for everyone else. And if someone came to be aware of this undesirable thing, this would dissatisfy that person. A person cannot be aware of everything however - merely those things that they can directly perceive. But there was no way of fathoming another's thoughts, or even if that other person was even real. And this was the part were the bamboches came in.

A husband and wife with a firm marriage could have had nearly the exact same ideal world, but if the wife wanted the trimming of the bedroom's curtains to be pink while the man preferred baby blue, their ideal world would still contradict each other and the bamboches would immediately come after them, separating them both into obscurity. Even if they cared very little about this subject of infinitely diminutive importance, they still cared and if they lived together, at least one of them would come to be aware of something undesirable. You see, in experience bamboches didn't differ from actual people. They could give as much joy to you as actual people could. But unlike actual people, they were not conscious and as such did not have any thoughts, desires and no ideal world that contradicted yours. Both wife and husband would eventually live separately in complete bambochades. They would both sleep next to a bamboche that looked like the other and just before closing their eyes and falling asleep see the only difference in their two different worlds; the trimming's colour. Wasn't that terrible, this involuntary trade-off, where all your loved ones were separated from you forever and you would not even realise.

CHAPTER 1

Loretta was invited to the evening gala. But it would have been wrong for you to extend your congratulations to her - condolences would have been more appropriate. After this event she knew she would be dead to practically all the friends she had ever had. Even friends was a dubious word - let's say, all the people she had ever known. She would never see them again. And that was something she had feared so deeply for a long time. Because, unlike the others, she was not going to university; would not share with them their rites of initiation to adulthood, their lows and highs, those moments that shape lives and give them their meaning and beauty. She would be devoid of any of that - was indeed entering an unknown stage of her life that she feared - she could feel a certain cold and loneliness creeping in already. Soon, she knew, she would be totally alone.

The only classmate she had been close with was Isabella. Loretta had not been able to bond with anyone else - maybe for lack of trying, maybe because it had been unnecessary then - but Isabella was her only true friend. To an outsider this might have come as a surprise, for Loretta was the kind of a woman you only meet once or twice in a lifetime: her startling blue eyes, blond tresses, and perfectly proportionate face made her the epitome of aesthetically supremacy. Boys, for this reason, were always lusting after her, finding new ways of teasing her to try and get her attention. Similarly, girls had tried to ingratiate themselves with her, but not because they felt a love of kinship with her, but purely out of strategic reasons: being seen and associated with someone so beautiful would surely enhance their own value in the eyes of men. Hence Loretta had always had someone sitting next to her in class. But she always radiated, or so all the others felt, a certain cold detachment; that even though she was physically sitting next to them, it felt like she - or at least the most important part of her - was thousands of miles away from them, removed up in the iciest and least hospitable mountain tops of the Alps. This was the impression Loretta made on them - of someone that was impossible to reach or penetrate. Not quite of this world, and certainly not of them. And this, in turn, did breed a certain general jealousy and hatred towards her.

It was not true that Loretta had a cold heart. She desperately wanted company, she desperately needed a shoulder to lean on; feeling the warmth of another human being. She even enjoyed chatting with others, or at least the feeling of being in touch with another - even though the actual subject matter was never of any interest to her whatsoever.

So this night - this gala night - was one of mixed feelings that ran very deeply. It was very important to her that she looked at her best that day. And for this reason Isabella and she had an

appointment at the local beauty salon in the afternoon. She knew they had everything there: all sorts of make-up, lotions, creams, cosmetic potions concocted through indecipherable but effective ingredients. Loretta's skin was dry, her hair messy - and they could surely fix this. But when they arrived by the door of the beauty salon in the late afternoon, they found that the salon had closed early. All the staff were classmates of Loretta's and they had taken the day off because of the gala later that night. Loretta's heart sank. However, they could slip inside, although this was of course completely illegal.

Loretta had a side job as a hairdresser at the beauty salon and her manager had entrusted her with the keys. Entrusted them, it must be said, out of pure laziness; the manager did not wish to open the hair salon himself and so this job was relegated to his severely underpaid trainee, who was there punctually each morning when he himself was still asleep. But now Loretta could finally make good use of this.

The manager had been making a good little fortune on the backs of these girls, whom he treated as slaves. About fifty young schoolgirls were employed by him as hairdressers, beauty specialists, sun tanning exerts, you name it. He did not care in the least to instruct any of them, because that would have required him to expand some energy and effort. Most customers forgave the fact that none of them were trained specialists - as most of them compensated for this by their beauty and mild, pleasant demeanour. They got away with it as long as all that was required from them was rubbing someone's back or splashing herbal oils onto them. But precise hairstyling and dressing required more substantial skill. And the results of these untrained girls wielding their scissors gleefully and overconfidently did not always give results that could be called satisfactory. Hence the hairdressing area was located in the furthest recess of the salon's backrooms.

Now Loretta and Isabella stepped into the darkness of the hairdressing area. And only when they had softly pushed the door shut behind them, did they switch on the light. The light flickered momentarily and then the entire space was incredibly and starkly well-lit. The hairdressing area was entirely white; the marble floor, the plaster and the damask wallpaper.

Isabella carelessly hopped towards the rear of the row of barber's chairs. "Miss Loretta," she intoned in the pompous voice of their manager. "Pray, take a seat. May I be so free to say you look particularly ravishing this afternoon?"

Loretta laughed but when she looked into the mirror, she noticed that her friend had changed so much. It hit her like a brick wall. She was not the child she had befriended in kindergarten. Yes, her baby fat had made ways for prominent, seductive cheekbones and her face had gotten much more oval, but that wasn't what she meant. She meant that she had changed in a much more essential way. When she looked at Isabella she had the exact same feeling as when she looked to the stucco angels that decorated the pediment above the mirror. Something was missing. She felt like she - and she alone - had been caught in some kind of half-nightmare that she could not wrestle herself free from.

"Why do you care so much about this gala?" Isabella asked with feigned laughter, but - Loretta could see in the mirror - her eyes were strictly focused on hers to gauge her reaction. "If you don't care much about any of the attendees, why even go?"

When Loretta stayed silence, her friend tried another verbal nudge to get her going. "You never really used to talk to any of them - your classmates, I mean. They were always falling over themselves to engage with you, initially at least, in the beginning. But whenever they came to sit next to you, you were completely silent. Like a ghost. Like an pointy, frosty icicle." Isabella laughed to lighten the mood, to make it sound like it was not a pointed accusation. "But now, suddenly, at the very last moment, you have decided to take an interest in them? Well, I don't believe it. I don't think ever much cared about the attendees that will show up tonight. Even though they were around you - all of them - for almost six years."

"There is someone I am interested in. He isn't new to school, but you don't *really* know him."

"Oh, really," said Isabella, intrigued. "A he? Who is this? Now you simply have to tell me." It remained awkwardly silent, and with every additional second the silence grew even more and more uncomfortable. And then it dawned on Isabella - it was her own boyfriend that Loretta was aiming for.

"It is Maximilian, isn't it?" Isabella dropped her comb and scissors and her mouth remained wide open in amazement. "Listen, don't be a shrinking violet and that I will now start shrieking at you in uncontrollable fury. Frankly, I don't care. If you want Maximilian, you can have him. After all, even though neither of us ever officially ended our relationship, we haven't seen each other for the best part of three years! Maximilian is nothing but a massive jute bag filled with testosterone. He's only good for kicking a ball and jumping on smaller guys to wrestle them to the ground. Do you really think he stayed loyal to me in those three years? No - plenty of girls who throw themselves at him, and he is not one to say no to his most base impulses. Besides, I also slept with others, unapologetically. I hope I am not the reason you waited so long to take action on him? Your undying loyalty to your eternal best friend?"

"Basically, yes."

"Why, that is so sweet of you. If you really want that brute, if you think that is the best you can get, why I'm quite glad to help you. But honestly, I would give it a second thought if I were you. There are better men."

Isabella looked at her friend and her half-finished hair job. "Wait, is it because you feel you will have no-one else to spend the next year with? Are you afraid of being lonely, Loretta? Because then I could suggest to you a garden gnome. Better company, both physically and intellectually, I can assure you."

At that moment Loretta broke out in tears and buried her face deep in her hands. "My love, if you really want, you can always come to Fredericia with me. I have a very nice room, if a little on the small side. You can follow the courses with me. It doesn't matter that you don't know the language, the people are much more open-minded there than you ever knew them to be here."

Loretta could feel herself grow quite hot in the head. She was very angry with Isabella for saying all this, and she wanted to lash out at her quite badly. But this was an idea that carried to much risk with it. This could trap her in a complete bambochade. She had to avoid this at all costs; it was her number one priority, and Isabella did not even have a clue.

"This is so awfully kind of you," Loretta said with fluttering eyelashes. "But I'm afraid I can't." Loretta had to be so very careful with her words right now. Otherwise, if she explained too much, Isabella would think she was certifiably crazy.

"There is an attempt to replace every single one of my real-life contacts with automata, bamboches, that are indistinguishable from real people."

Isabella kept her lips together, while not trying to burst out in laughter.

"Don't be silly, Loretta, I know you have a great imagination. Why not do a course in film and television studies? You know, maybe you can introduce fantastical thinking to the Danes."

"I am serious! You and everyone else can't discern an actual person and a bamboche, I can. I see a very clear difference between them and I will not ignore it. One is conscious and the other is not. I see it."

A dark frown appeared on Isabella's face, and then she put her hands inside her beauty case, as though to grab something. Perhaps a weapon? Loretta's gaze remained firmly on Isabella's hands, and then…

"Ta daa! I got this little bottle of kirschwasser before we came here. I think it's time to get wasted, Loretta. Enough talking, let's get ready for the party."

Slowly each word that Isabella spoke, each movement that she made, each sound that the

bottle made resonated inside Loretta's head. Shadows seemed to stretch and creep across the white walls as Loretta's mind zoomed in on Isabella's sneaking, sinister smile. Loretta's eyes shot open. For the first time she realised that Isabella was not Isabella. Her world started to turn around, and upside down, and evaporated into itself. The clock in the corner of the room lost its hands, and these pointers now seemed to sparkle in her friend's eyes. Loretta took some steps back. She now realised her friend was a bamboche. And the bamboche had "sensed" Loretta's suspicions. To crush them, the bamboche was now trying to feed her alcohol in an attempt to shut down her mind, under the guise of prepping for the gala. How long had Isabella been a bamboche for? When is the last time Loretta had seen her real, actual friend? Was it last week? Was it a year ago? Had her friend been kidnapped by the bamboches in childhood, briefly after they had met? Had all their friendship been an illusion, a lie, a bambochade? A tear rolled down Loretta's petrified cheek, her eyes large with unbelief. Then, in a moment of sheer terror, Loretta jumped forward and grabbed the bottle out of the bamboche's hands. She smashed it on the hairdresser's counter, and then pointed in threateningly at the bamboche, who immediately retreated and started pleading emotionally with Loretta to put away the bottle. With a frightened and crying face, but with her large wet eyes focused firmly on the bamboche, Loretta stepped closer, the broken bottle pointed at the fake monstrosity. The bamboche reached the far limits of the room, and got on its knees, begging for her life, but Loretta - weeping and shrieking with her big wet eyes focused on the bamboche - started slashing her with the bottle. Before she could inflict any damage and destroy the bamboche, the bamboche started to hysterically crawl across the floor and tried to run to the exit. The bamboche tried to turn the handle, but then - realising that the key was still in Loretta's pocket - the bamboche turned around its slowly trembling head to look at Loretta.

"I do exist, I do have a consciousness and I am aware of every heartless bit you think about me," the bamboche said to her. She wiped the last tear off her cheek. "Nonetheless, I am still willing to believe you. Maybe what you see right before you is indeed nothing but an automaton, a bamboche that doesn't have any consciousness. I do still exist, but live in a completely different place than you. Yet the places in which we live are designed to be perceptibly the same. As such there is a bamboche with you that is imitating me in my appearance and in everything I do. And the same thing counts for you, there is a bamboche with me that is an imitation of you. Aren't these bamboches wonderful things then? The reason why we could have contact with each other, even if we are not together. How lucky we are."

This bamboche was humiliating Isabella without any consent. The deception had to stop, first the deception of being Isabella part, then the deception of being a human part. This was such a disgrace. The Isabella she saw lying in front of her was merely a pentagrammic prism with one very short spherical arm and four other arms becoming longer the further away they were from the short arm. Loretta lifted her feet just to kick straight in the short swollen arm, a several times which made an undetermined shape distinguishable by its red colour appear and expand in size. The spherical arm had to be heavily distorted in shape so nobody would falsely recognise it as the head of her friend or that of a human at all. After kicking a few times she had completely disfigured the spherical arm, the closest think it resembled then was a smashed watermelon.